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ABSTRACT

This paper explores briefly the perspectives of McLuhan as seer, as culturologist, as communication theorist, and as rhetorical theorist. As a social prophet or seer, McLuhan was a major force during the 1960's; he helped us discover social and psychic targets in time to prepare to cope with them. By realizing and interpreting the effects of mass communication networks on social and sensory organization and thought, McLuhan also correctly fits into the role of culturologist. And even though many of his theories of mass communication are not capable of social-scientific testing, at least some of them are. Therefore, he can be seen as a communication theorist. Finally, one can view McLuhan as a rhetorical theorist. He begins from an ontological perspective, reconstitutes the communication process from that point of view, and then returns to the world of things/events/persons, offering advice on message-generating and message-critiquing processes. (TS)

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ON TAKING MARSHALL MCLUHAN SERIOUSLY

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Tonight, I want to address a single question in my few minutes at the beginning of this panel: How best can we take Marshall McLuhan seriously? Let me say at the onset of my remarks that of course he can be taken unseriously, as a kind of verbi-voco-visual punster, as a cathartic for academically constipated intellects. But, while McLuhan does provide artistic, satirical, and sexual fun,[1] he can nevertheless be taken quite seriously. Tonight, then, realizing that I may be violating the sensibilities of those who place him alongside Captain Marvel and Norm Crosby, I want to review the ways, intellectually acceptable ways, in which Marshall McLuhan can be evaluated. I shall explore briefly the perspectives of McLuhan as seer, as culturologist, as communication theorist, and as rhetorical theorist.

McLuhan as Seer

The first, perhaps even the most attractive, perspective from which McLuhan can be judged is that of seer or social prophet. In the mid-60's, particularly, McLuhan often was viewed this way; the headlines calling him "Oracle of the Electronic Age" or "Prophet of Pop Art" were derived from such a vantage. Now, the prophet, of course, is a person who dons sackcloth and ashes, crying doom to those who would fail to perceive the coming of a New Age. The prophet probably has a fatalistic messianic complex, yet nonetheless is dedicated to slaying the dragons of perverted perspective, concep-

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tual complacency, and befogged behavior. The prophet in the usual scenario is persecuted by the perverse, sacrificed, and indeed martyred, only to have Truth rise from his ashes in posthumous adoration of his vision. Pigeons sit respectfully upon his statues, and disciples dogear, fondle, and unashamedly worship his products. It is, as I said, tempting to look at McLuhan as the voice crying in the wilderness, "Beware the electronic revolution! Make straight the ways of the photoelectric cell!" This perspective, furthermore, even recieves his own endorsement in the second introduction to Understanding Media, wherein McLuhan talks about the artist as "an early alarm system, as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them."[2]

McLuhan as prophet offers us an attractive perspective because it explains the sounds of winds which accompanied him in the period 1964-70. McLuhan viewed as prophet or seer allows us to discuss him alongside the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, the Beatles, Haight Ashbury, the 1968 Democratic Convention, ecological teach-ins, Ralph Nader, Martin Luther King, Kent State, and humanistic psychology as a force shaping the New Order of the '70s--a force freeing the mind from institutionalized thought-patterns, corporate indolence and dishonesty, scientism, backroom politics, in a word, from positivistic thinking and behavior.

The principal problem, however, in viewing McLuhan as prophet is obvious--the prophet has power only historically. The prophet is disturbing for an age, a time, is a seer who served a purpose then so that we could better do what we do now and in the future. In other words, viewing McLuhan as prophet allows us, unfortunately I think, to say, "Thanks, Marshall baby, for helping us understand

ourselves--we can take it from here." Moses, afterall, got the Israelites to the Promised Land, but it was Gideon, a follower, who actually led them in. I would maintain, quite the contrary, that McLuhan still speaks to us, that McLuhan offered in the late 60's a theoretical perspective which still has viability and use.

McLuhan as Culturologist

Another vantage from which to view McLuhan is from that posed by several cultural anthropologists and even some social historians. The study of communication systems as indices to a given culture certainly is not new, but in the hands of McLuhan's fellow Torontan, Harold Adams Innis, among others, it became a controversial yet potent analytical tool. Innis' landmark publication in 1950 of Empire and Communication[3] provided an examination of communication and culture startling, disturbing, and yet tantalizingly provocative. To Innis, any social mass is sustained by its communication networks, which after all are the means of social integration. But, Innis went a controversial step farther, arguing that the type of media dominant in a culture fundamentally controlled the destiny of that culture. Those cultures dominated by oral and other difficult-to-transport media, such as clay and papyrus, are time-bound, with biases toward tradition, the sacred, and the historical--in sum, are oriented toward the past and characterized by strong ecclesiastical elites. The oral culture of Ancient Greece and the papyrus culture of the early Byzantine Empire are Innis' examples of tight, hierarchically organized cultures, wherein monopolies of knowledge produced time-bound, traditionalized societies. Those cultures, however, dominated by written, easy-to-transport media, such as

parchment and paper, are not time-bound but rather space-bound, with biases toward the present and future, toward politics, toward nationalism and expansion. The decentralization of knowledge found in such writing cultures as Rome, the later Byzantine Empire, England, and the United States produced horizontal rather than vertical societies of spatially conscious empire-builders.

It is, naturally, very tempting to interpret McLuhan as a culturologist operating within similar parameters, given his frequent quotation of Innis and Walter Ong,[4] given the core argument of Gutenberg Galaxy, given his examination of the railroad and other modes of transportation, and given such slogans as "the medium is the message." McLuhan critic James W. Carey, however, I think puts his finger on an essential difference between the two men's concerns: "Both McLuhan and Innis assume the centrality of communication technology; where they differ is in the principal kinds of effects they see deriving from this technology. Whereas Innis sees communication technology principally affecting social organization and culture, McLuhan sees its principal effect on sensory organization and thought."[5] Both Carey and Gronbeck think McLuhan's sensory-extension theory lies more directly in line with Whorf, Sapir, and other psycholinguists than with social-cultural anthropologists. Thus, while Innis undoubtedly has affected many of McLuhan's aphorisms and macroscopic generalizations relative to East and West, the Renaissance and today, Innis' concerns do not account, certainly, for McLuhan's pervasive interests in sense-extension and internal message-processing. The culturological interpretation of McLuhan explains but part, and not the most important part, of what is there.

McLuhan as Mass Communication Theorist

In the third place, McLuhan has been viewed from the perspective of mass communication theory. Now, a social-scientific theory of mass communication seeks predictive generalizations about the origins, functions, and outcomes of communicative interactions on a macro-social level. If McLuhan offers a mass communication theory--and Loevinger and Sandman et al., among others, believe he does[6]--then one ought to be able to test his generalizations with experimental and/or survey research data. At least a couple of folks have. John Wilson of the African Institute of London University provides survey data indicating that different cultures "view" various media in different ways. African children picked objects rather than story lines out of a narrative film, not connecting scenes but rather focusing on individual objects such as chickens from scene to scene; McLuhan explains the finding in terms of habituated, media-controlled perceptual processes.[7] And, Herbert Krugman, a physiological psychologist in New York, has done studies of brain waves of subjects reading ads and viewing TV commercials, noting that Delta waves drop significantly when television is being watched, indicating a state of passivity; Krugman concludes, "The basic electrical response of the brain is clearly to the media and not to content differences."[8]

At least some, then, of McLuhan's generalizations are capable of social-scientific testing, but what must gnaw at every person attempting to cast McLuhan as a communication theorist is the fact that many of his sweeping judgments are unsuited to operationalization and testing. His historical judgments, for example, involve gross leaps-of-faith, and there seems no way one can attempt to

operationalize, say, his key concepts of "sensory-extension," "matching vs. making," the "narcissus neurosis," etc. One may want to agree with Sandman et al.--that "all the social science Ph.D.s in the country could spend their lifetimes testing McLuhan's guesses--and maybe they should"[9]--yet I think that the testing processes would blow out both human and technical circuits in pursuit of emphemera.

McLuhan as Rhetorical Theorist

Finally, one can view McLuhan as a rhetorical theorist. A rhetorical theorist has concerns very different from those of his social-scientific brethren. He begins from an ontological perspective; once he has made a series of normative rather than merely descriptive assumptions about the nature of man, he then reconstitutes the communication process from that particular point of view, choosing a unitary vantage point from which to assess and adjudge that process; and finally, once he has engaged in such normative and prescriptive activities, only then does he return to the world of things/events/persons, offering advice on message-generating and message-critiquing processes. Aristotle's view of man as a rational animal; Quintilian's, of man as an ethical animal; I. A. Richards', of man as a symbol-misusing being; and now Lloyed Bitzer's, of man as a situationally constrained beast--all offered ontological judgments to create radically differentiated rhetorical theories. McLuhan, as I have argued elsewhere, likewise apparently has made an important ontological decision in selecting media as his normative entry into the communication process. He made that entry as early as his Classical Journal article of 1946, wherein he illustrated the lifestyles which result from linear vis-à-vis dialectical media; his 1951 The

Mechanical Bride was a pessimistic analysis of the "world of social myths of forms . . . employed in an effort to paralyze the mind." Only after these normative excursions into the ethics of medial manipulation did McLuhan then (1) articulate a media-centered theory of communication in Understanding Media, and (2) become a media advisor through his Dew-Line audio-cassettes and such books as his Take Today: The Executive as Dropout (1972).[10]

What I am saying is that approaching McLuhan as a rhetorical theorist forces one to recognize that he has an ontological ax to grind; he may call himself a mere probe, but in his hands, ultimately, that probe is a two-edged sword carving out a New, Idealized Society populated by attuned, synesthetic creatures. I personally, as one might suppose, think this perspective causes us the least problems as we try to take him seriously.

These four perspectives--those of seer, culturologist, mass communication theorist, and rhetorical theorist--all, I maintain, are "serious" approaches to McLuhan, each highlighting some particular aspect of McLuhanism and collectively guaranteeing that he will be read not only yesterday but also today and tomorrow. I believe, of course, that his wheaty truths are often coated with heavy layers of chaff and may even exist alongside some wildoats. Even if one stresses the wildoats, one probably has to agree with Jonathan Miller when he says: "Perhaps McLuhan has accomplished the greatest paradox of all, creating the possibility of truth by shocking us all with a gigantic system of lies."[11] If one stresses the true wheat, then Kenneth Boulding has offered the correct interpretation: "It is perhaps typical of very creative minds that they hit very large nails not quite on the head."[12]

NOTES

[1]Even the "fun," however, can be discussed seriously as a kind of intellectual stance; see especially the first four chapters of Donald F. Theall, The Medium is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1971).

[2]Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (ppk. ed.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. x.

[3]Harold Adams Innis, Empire and Communication (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), passim. See also his The Bias of Communication (1951).

[4]Ong has been another important influence on McLuhan, especially upon Gutenberg Galaxy. See his Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Eloquence (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958) and his newer collection of essays, Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology; Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971).

[5]James W. Carey, "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan," in McLuhan: Pro and Con, ed. Raymond Rosenthal (ppk. ed.; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 281.

[6]Lee Loevinger, "The Ambiguous Mirror: The Reflective-Projective Theory of Broadcasting and Mass Communications," in Mass Media: Forces in Our Society, ed. Francis and Ludmila Voelker (San Francisco: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), esp. pp. 28-30; and, Peter M. Sandman, David M. Rubin, and David B. Sachsman, Media: An Introductory Analysis of American Mass Communications (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), esp. pp. 230-236.

[7]Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1962), pp. 36-37.

[8]Reported in Sandman et al., p. 232, and in "TV vs. Print," Newsweek, 2 November 1970, pp. 122-123.

[9]Sandman et al., p. 236.

[10]This analysis is expanded in "Rhetoric and/of McLuhan," in Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric; Selections and Readings, ed. Richard L. Johannesen (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 288-301. The last book mentioned is Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt, Take Today: The Executive as Dropout (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972); its content and advisory thrust are discussed in McLuhan and Nevitt, "Medium Meaning Message,: Communication, 1 (1974): pp. 27-33.

[11]Jonathan Miller, Marshall McLuhan (New York: Viking Press, 1971), p. 124.

[12]Kenneth E. Boulding, "It is Perhaps Typical . . . ," in McLuhan: Hot & Cool, ed. Gerald E. Stearn (New York: Signet Books, 1969), p. 68.